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# Mapping the Railway in the Balkans: Cultural Landscapes and Imaginaries

*Cultural landscapes of the Balkans have been shaped at the intersection of symbolic geography and geopolitics in a long time horizon. In terms of symbolic geography, the Balkans has been inserted in long – standing binary oppositions, and also as a space a space of liminality. The point of departure in the paper is laid upon the notion of landscape that embraces material and social practices along with their symbolic representation. The approach to the railway discourse relies on its constitutive social meaning, as a means of modernization and progress, and also as a cultural metaphor. The paper elaborates various meanings of railway that constitute the grounds for the mapping and conceiving Balkan railway cultural landscapes and routes of its cultural topography.*

**Key words:** cultural landscape, railway, the Balkans, narrative, spatial turn

## Cultural landscape and the *spatial turn*

*The spirit of a place resides in its landscape.*

Edward Relph (1976: 30)

Reflections on 'landscape and space' have been introduced as part of the 'spatial turn' whose scope remains unclear and differently used in the various theoretical groundings nowadays. Observing space as a material object as well as text / discourse means to establish an understanding between the scientific and humanistic approaches towards their unified approach in cultural geography (Hess-Lüttich 2012: 5-8). Through different perspectives the 'spatial turn' – phenomenological, cartographic, topographic, and topological, as Hess-Lüttich suggests – the heterogeneity of space and its meanings in different disciplines and categorical networks is underlined. In the context of globalization, as the consequence of 'the time-space compression' (Harvey 1990) and 'the temporal-spatial separation' (Giddens 1990) the interpretation

of the differences between the notions of space and place also become particularly relevant.

The shift of the research perspective from space to processes of its production in the work of Henri Lefebvre introduced a more critical theoretical stance, with the argument that space is a social product, or a complex social construction based on values and production of meanings which affects spatial practices and perceptions. The space is a social morphology, an image of complex mobilities (Lefebre 1991: 92-93). In addition to this, the notion of *heterotopia* (Foucault 1986) determined as a discourse, cultural and institutional area which in some way is the 'other' – a world within a world – space with multiple layers of significance, widens the scope of approach to the research on the space. Some typical examples of these include a museum, a theater, a cemetery, a prison, or a train station. All these theoretizations led to new thinking about the relations between history, geography and modernity, and thus led to the new spatial paradigm, which offers a notion of space as a 'cultural construct'. The very term 'spatial turn' was introduced in the context od the diagnosis of the postmodern condition by Frederic Jameson (1991) and later in the work of Edward W. Soja through the notions of the 'perceived', 'imaginary', and 'lived' spaces, i.e. in terms of spatiality, historicity and sociability (1996: 38-39). The new spatial paradigm is thus determined by the very notion and significance of spatiality to offer a perspective in which space is at the heart of interdisciplinary research, and indicating the necessity of understanding the relationship of reciprocity of time and space in a broader sense.

On the grounds of humanistic phenomenological orientation, the concept of place is seen a key to understanding space, primarily in terms of the relationship between subject and space through the experience. A space becomes a place through experience. The ways in which space turns into place, and the ways it is filled with meaning, is of central importance for the analysis which focuses on the subjectivity and interpretation. Thus, a place is not just a physical space / spatial concept, a place on the map, but it is also an imaginary space / mental category, a frame of reference in the construction of identity. The ambiguity of the concept of place is reflected through cultural references – as specific geographical areas, identity markers and places of memory (*lieux de memoire*). A wider notion of place is particularly present in the imaginary topography and geography – places are not only literary and artistic texts, but also the author's biography, articles, documents of cultural memory, and so on. *Sense of place* is understood as a characteristic of a place that makes it unique and as an expression of the way people feel and think about space, how to shape their attachment and belonging to the place and thus its identity as a unique *genius loci*. Whether it is interpreted as a spatial concept of the actual topography or as a reference, a representation of 'the mental' topography, as 'a

place of meaning', as a 'palimpsest', a 'symbolic space', 'narrative space', a place name, or just part of the landscape, place remains a key reference point in the study of cultural and geographical and even historical reality (Rogač Mijatović 2018: 150-151).

What is, then, landscape, in relation to space and place? The 'the rise of cultural landscapes' (Jacques 1995) is rooted in the notion that places or landscapes that reflect everyday ways of life are significant, because they tell the story of people through time, offering a meaning and a sense of continuity. Carl Sauer, American geographer and one of the pioneering scholars on cultural landscape introduced the very concept in the 1920s within the field of cultural geography.[1]

> *The works of man express themselves in the cultural landscape. There may be a succession of these landscapes with a succession of cultures. [...] The cultural landscape then is subject to change either by development of a culture or by replacement of cultures.* (Sauer 1925: 20)

In his study *The Making of the English Landscape* W. G. Hoskins noted that 'The landscape itself, to those who know how to read it aright is the richest historical record we possess' (Hoskins 1955: 14). The landscape is both the context and an attribute of a place, and a setting for cultural heritage. The movement from one place to another makes a landscape, and the horizon determines its limits (Relf 1976: 659). The landscape reflects not just a cultural tradition, but also a multitude of common system of symbols and meanings. In the new cultural geography, cultural landscape is explored not only through the artifacts of culture, but rather through the signs of cultural polyphony.

> *It is now widely accepted that landscapes reflect human activity and are imbued with cultural values. They combine elements of space and time, and represent political as well as social and cultural constructs. As they have evolved over time, and as human activity has changed, they have acquired many layers of meaning that can be analyzed through historical, archaeological, geographical and sociological study.* (Leader-Elliot et al 2004)

These reflections contributed to the the modern foundation and discourse on landscape study, where landscape is not seen simply as a picture or as a

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[1] The notion of cultural landscape as 'Kulturlandschaft' was previously introduced by the German geographer Carl Ritter (1832), taken over by his followers, most famous among them Friedrich Ratzel (1893).

static text but rather as the expression of cultural process by which national and social identities are formed (Mitchell 1994: 1). Landscape is a storehouse of private and collective memories, thus it is a cultural construct encoded with various meanings. The relations between landscape and identity and hence memory, are thus fundamental to understanding of landscape and human sense of place.

## Tracking railway meanings – from modernity to global scales

The beginnings of railway are deeply rooted in the industrialization processes of urbanization of Europe. The project of modernity in Europe spread the ideas of reason, science and secularism, and the railroad appeared as the technical guarantee of democracy, harmony between nations, peace, and progress. It marked a technological triumph of mankind over nature. Railway played an active part in constructing the nation as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991). In India, for example, the railway has been the most important material emblem of modernity, and also of a colonial, then a national and finally a global identity (Aguiar 2011: xii).

It is widely argued that the industrialized 'machine ensemble' of the railway introduced new notions of time and space (Schivelbusch 2014: 70). It can be noted that the railway created a kind of dynamic circular geography both imagined and real – it facilitated movement and mobility at various scales. While railway itself has often been perceived as a machine that annihilates time and space, and thus deprived of its meaningfulness as landscapes or spaces of memory, on the other hand it appears as a transitory space, a space *in between* – the starting point and the place of arrival. This liminality can be seen as a quality that underpins the agency of the railway. Thus the railway appears as technology of movement and as a dynamic imaginative form – mobility both symbolic and actual. Being literally a space of 'in and out conduits' the railway is in a wider sense a constitutive of social meaning. In the space of the railway one can see the tension between its political meaning that is constantly reconfigured and challenged (Beaumont, Freedman 2007: 42).

In shaping the idea of travel and its significance in assessments of movement James Clifford argued that 'travels and contacts are crucial sites for an unfinished modernity', and that these practices of crossing and interaction challenge many assumptions about culture (1997: 2). The rhetoric of modernity affirmed a specific culture of mobility, as Marcel Proust explains in his book *Remembrance of Things Past,*

> ... *After all, the special attraction of the journey lies not in our being able to alight at places on the way and to stop altogether as soon as we grow*

*tired, but in its making the difference between the departure and arrival not so imperceptible but as intense as possible [...] because it united two distinct individualities of the world, took us from one name to another name, and this difference is accentuated [...] by the mysterious operation that is performed in these peculiar places, railway stations, which do not constitute, so to speak, a part of the surrounding town, but contain the essence of its personality just upon their signboards they bear its painted name.* (Proust 2006: 590)

The relationship between the railway station and the city has always been a complex one. Railway had a key role in 'the cultural turn' from the rural to the urban identity development. The relationship between the rural and the urban, between country and city is much marked by the railway, and at the same time it functions as a determinant of the identity both at national and wider regional level. The public space of the railway includes railway infrastructure, like tracks, stations, carriages, but it is also a representation of the state and its economic power. This infrastructure can also be seen as a specific landscape in order to reveal its role in shaping urban cultural identities. With the introduction of high-speed rail, railway stations of the 'second rail era' address their inherent liminality and add to their transitory character memorable architectural forms and thus become city symbols, landmark, image-makers, etc. (Morka 2012: 197). For example, railway stations such as the first London Euston Station, Berlin Station, the Gare du Nord Paris, or Amsterdam Central, all represent symbols of their respective cities.

In literary flows railway appears as part of the technical progress and modernization, in line with the Zeitgeist of the modern era, as a conquering space that is directed not only toward modernity, but also to the future, which is present in literary manifestos, fiction, as well as travel literature. As a place of various encounters, the train has a social dimension – it is a microcosm that connects friends and strangers, *chronotope* that compresses the space and time, a stage where writers set their stories (Grubačić 2017: 22–27).

By invoking a sense of nostalgia, representations of railway turn back to an idealized image, to a more perfect past that was never actually experienced. These coordinates of nostalgic symbolic geography create meaning within the historical narratives of progress. It is quite often shown that not only earlier travel writings but contemporary travel narratives as well show geographical hierarchies in sense that they reproduce a specific and sometimes problematic understanding of history where space, time and identity are mapped according to the Western notions of progress and evolution (Lisle 2006: 203).

Railway travel has for long been associated with views. By introducing the term 'panoramic perception' (W. Schivelbusch) the modern perception of

the landscape has also been transformed 'from a place in which to act into a sight to behold' (Hvattum 2011: 114). In this view, there is a possibility of getting to know places, and also of reasoning foreign spaces through railway. This spatial dimension appears as an obvious marker of difference, where 'a foreign territory' marks 'difference' and thus opens up questions of identity. The meanings of railway that are tracked through complex spatial approaches show its importance not only as a means of technical development from modernity, but also as a cultural metaphor with many layers at contemporary global scales. Railway indicates the ratio of the real and imaginary space in determining the identity of the Balkans, and shows how the analytical imaginary and mythical representations of the Balkans have been transformed into symbols of places in a geographical sense.

## The Balkans between real and symbolic geography

Where does the Balkans begin and where does it end? By representing the Balkans as a 'place' in a discourse-geography and by introducing Balkanism as a critical study of colonial representation distinctly different from Orientalism, many authors have given a significant contribution to this question (Todorova 1997; Goldsworthy 1998; Bakic-Hayden 1995, and others). The label 'Balkans' that seems to be applied to a geographical area refers mainly to the 'Other' Europe, the Europe under the Ottoman rule (Jezernik, 2007: 6). This further opens the question of marking the boundaries of the real and imaginary / mental topography, or the identity, memory and heritage of the Balkans. In examining these issues, and taking the Balkans as a discursive geography and a method for liminal space, some authors suggest that both historical as well as discursive analyses have to be applied (Bjelic 2002: 7). In addition to this, the main role in placing and relocating the Balkans in various and different physically-geographical paces has been attributed to history, or more precisely, to the political history that thematized political events, political 'reality', interpreted it in a way that constructed and deconstructed certain images, consolidating them, or rarely putting impact on reducing the stereotypes about them (Lazarević Radak 2014: 188). Thus, the starting point in this regard is the criticism of Orientalist exoticism positioning and strategy in symbolic geography of the Balkans, as well as Balkanist discourse in general.

Balkan cultural topography is shaped and changed at the crossroads of symbolic /imaginative geography and geopolitics in a long time horizon. In terms of symbolic geography, the Balkans has been and still remains inserted in long-standing binary oppositions – it has been formed with regard to relations between Europe and Asia, the West and the East, the so-called real Europe and the Balkans as alleged periphery. These discourses on the Balkans

are fixed and permanent, atemporal and widely applicable, and often there is something in them that exists in a particular historical time that is allocated and explained as something natural and normal, something that exists in all times (Luketić 2013: 25).

Metaphors used to describe the 'essence' of the Balkans – the bridge / the crossroads / the border – have been and still remain the basis for the creation of stereotypes as the dominant representation forms both inside and outside of the Balkans. For Todorova, for example, the bridge metaphor as a bridge between East and West is central since it reveals the Balkan experience of in-betweenness (Todorova, 1997: 18). Balkan myths also refer to the emergence and development of the textual representations of the Balkans, and negative imagery from the perspective of Balkan authors and in Western literature (Norris 1999).

In travel writings and narratives, as well as within culturally and socially mediated interpretations in a more broad sense, the dominant negative label of Western travel accounts (Pratt 1992, Hammond 2007) in defining the characteristics of the region is being followed and reinterpreted over time, representing the Balkans as the exotic Oriental (Basset 1990, Allock 1991), through violence and the primitive (Russell 1993, Murphy 2002), or as a Land of Discord, Savage Europe, Wild and Beautiful, The Other Europe (Jezernik 2004), etc. The origins of these can be found in popular works such as *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells, *Murder on the Orient-Express* by Agatha Christie, *Black Lamb and Gray Falcon* by Rebecca West, etc. Thus, the literary production on the Balkans, as part of the discourse of 'Balkanism' through travelogues and adventure novels, despite their primarily entertainment function, contributed to reproducing superficial and stereotypical images of Balkan landscapes as a wild, dangerous, exciting and mysterious.

The notion of the Balkans became dissonant and misinterpreted – as a forgotten and isolated region, an 'inner front' of Europe, a semi-periphery – and admired as remarkable Orient fantasy of lust, and colorful emotion. In both cases – whether one wants to abandon it with disgust or to visit it as an exciting safari – the Balkans is revealed mainly as a fantasy: a space beyond the normal and acceptable in civilized terms (Luketić 2013: 16). This frozen image of the Balkans has been transmitted and reproduced in extraneous contexts with almost no changes for decades. The question how to revise Europe's symbolic geographies of the Balkans and to accept its heritage, despite the fact that it is most often neglected, unwanted, appropriated, destroyed or simply banished to oblivion remains wide open (Dragićević-Šešić, Rogač-Mijatović 2014: 14). Thus, through the critique of Balkanism, not only as a critical analysis of the Balkan trope, the Balkans and its cultural landscapes might gain specificity by virtue of its liminal status, of being neither here nor there, but in two places at the same time.

## Towards the mapping of Balkan railway cultural landscapes and routes

The construction of railways in the Balkans since the mid-19th century was closely associated with urbanization, the construction of modern nations, as well as the progress that was promoted in the wider context of the industrialization of Europe. Railway projects by the Great powers from the time of the Ottoman empire onward were also a field of competing for supremacy in compliance with their own political and economic interests. Railroad construction was part of the crisis during World War I in some Balkan countries.

After Serbia gained independence at Berlin Congress in 1878, the condition was that the railway had to be built – so the first passenger train on the line Belgrade – Niš was released in 1884. In most of Balkan countries, railway has been a symbol of emancipationx after World War II and had big importance for constitution of political communities. For example, partisan railways as a system of railroads and rail traffic Bosnia and Herzegovina worked in several periods of the Second World War. After becoming non operable in the 1970s, parts of this railway infrastructure were declared the national monument of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Tito's train on Oštrelj, and the steam locomotive in Jajce, known as Mala partizanka, both produced in the early twentieth century. Indicative examples follow the case of the narrow-gauge railway: Brčko-Banovići (1946) and Šamac-Sarajevo (1947). The railway Brčko-Banovići in Bosnia and Herzegovina was the first railway in the postwar Europe, unique because it was built on the joint youth working action with the joint collaboration of 60.000 youngsters from Yugoslavia and more than 1.000 brigadiers from 20 foreign countries, completely done by hand. This action was interpreted through narratives of postwar solidarity, antifascism, emancipation and country development. Railway as symbolic legacy of Yugoslavia can also be traced through examples of Tito's Blue Train (1946-1980) Beograd – Bar railroad. On the other hand, the case of the The old train station in Skopje as one of the biggest in the Balkan peninsula at the time built in 1938 but demolished by the massive earthquake that crushed the city in 1963 remains listed as disaster tourism destination even nowadays.

Railway infrastructure reached peak in 1960s in most European counties, while in the Balkan countries the railway network hasn't completely been built much later, which practically and symbolically confirmed the thesis about the Balkans as a region of incomplete modernization and infrastructural backwardness (Jestly 2016: 10). Thus the neccessity to harmonize the railroad network remained as one of the great challenges for Balkan countries till the present days.

At the level of a cultural analysis, the mapping and shaping of Balkan railway landscapes require exploring the complexity of spaces in transcultural contexts. Grounded in the above considerations regarding the spatial turn and landscape scholarship, the project in progress *Balkan railway cultural landscapes and routes*, that will be carried out in the coming years, will not limit its focus only to one layer, like literary narratives, as it is usually the case when exploring the symbolic geographies. The focus will to be put in an attempt to map and analyze different data allowing us to reconstruct and rethink the relations and cultural impacts of the railway stations and the rail infrastructure as well as railway travel in shaping the cultural landscapes of the Balkans, its identity and heritage. Variety of cultural materials will serve to draw arguments about representations of the railway in the Balkans that include novels, stories, poems, essays, journal texts, photographs and films, but also archive material about its historical underpinnings. This conceptual framework for large scale mapping of Balkan railway cultural landscapes and routes is proposed in the wake of spatial logic, combined treatment of real and imaginary space, or physical, material, discursive, iconic, symbolic and emotional performative layers of space. The future map of Balkan railway cultural landscapes will allow for review of existing discursive definitions of the Balkans and its repositioning as a set of liminal places with great connectivity. Finally, this transnational research project will contribute to the further elaboration of many important issues like cultural transfer and dialogue, and also to the widening of research scope in the fields of cultural and literary studies along with cultural geography.

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Љиљана Рогач Мијатовић

### Мапирање железнице на Балкану: културни пејзажи и имагинације

Резиме

Културни пејзажи Балкана обликовани су и мењани на раскрсници културне и симболичке географије и геополитике у дугом временском хоризонту. Узимајући железницу као основу за мапирање ових предела, рад се фокусира на мапирање начина на које су наративи Балкана изграђени у овој интеракцији, и на сложеност њихових тумачења на различитим културним, гео-симболичким и политичким нивоима. У смислу симболичке географије, Балкан је кроз балканистички дискурс био и остаје убачен у дуготрајне бинарне супротности како споља, тако и изнутра. Ове балканске двозначности појављују се у путо-

писној литератури и другим књижевним наративима, као и у оквиру културно и друштвено посредованих тумачења у ширем смислу.

Полазна тачка у истраживању је заснована на ширем схватању појма пејзажа који обухвата материјалне и друштвене праксе заједно са својим симболичким представама, односно пејзажем као текстом. Приступ дискурсу железнице ослања се на њен конститутивни друштвени смисао, и даље, на значај железнице не само као средства модернизације и напретка, већ и као вишеслојне културне метафоре. Железница као слика хаоса и реда, наративи путовања возом, железнички књижевни тропи, носталгични пејзажи пруге и воза, само су неки од различитих симболичких слојева железнице који се испитују. Симболичком културном мапирању Балкана преко просторно временске линије железнице приступа се у циљу стварања мапе културних предела и рута односно као прилог једног културној топографији Балкана.

**Кључне речи:** културни пејзаж, железница, Балкан, наратив, просторни обрт